Parents Hear Stark Story of Cyberbullying, Depression and Suicide

Rapt attention given to parent who tells how cyberbullying was one factor that led to his son's suicide.

* By [Ann Piccirillo](http://newmilford-nj.patch.com/users/ann-piccirillo)
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It seems that the world children are being raised in today is much safer than the one their parents came of age in. From playdates to prom night, children are chaperoned throughout all social situations.

Except the social situations that matter most: those found on the internet.

That was the message that John Halligan brought to the parents of New Milford last week when he spoke about his son Ryan's suicide at the age of 13 in 2003. In painstaking language, Halligan explained that the weapon that assisted in the death of his son was the internet.

Halligan, a parent like all those sitting in the audience before him, who caution their children about the danger of strangers on the internet, stressed that for his son, the danger of the internet was not to be found in the threat of a potential predator, but in those kids who were a part of his own community.

According to Halligan, it was the children his son went to school with, grew up with, played sports with that ultimately turned on him and used the computer to harass and embarrass him.

Halligan said that the time that preceded Ryan's death, he exhibited no warning signs of depression or isolation. He also left no suicide note, leaving the answers to the question of why his son took his life unanswered. Unanswered until Halligan learned how to speak the language of Ryan's peers--not face to face, but through the computer. When conversed with on the internet, these children helped Halligan piece together shards of information that led to an explanation of why his son took his own life.

Still, despite what he learned, there was that gnawing question: how could I not know about the anguish my son was suffering that led him to take his life?

Ryan Halligan was born in Poughkeepsie, New York in 1989. When Ryan was young, the family moved to Essex Junction, Vermont where his father had been transferred for business.

According to his father, Ryan struggled early on with delays in language and fine and gross motor skills. At the age of three, the school district provided services and continued to do so up until the fourth grade. It was in the fourth grade that Ryan caught up to his peers and tested out of special education. He was completely mainstreamed, a dream, Halligan said, held by many parents whose children are in self-contained special education classes.

"When Ryan was young he loved sports," Halligan said. "He was awkward, but so was everyone at that age, so it wasn't a big deal."

Until fifth grade. According to Halligan, that's when the bullying began. Even though Ryan was no longer in special education classes, one boy and his friends began to make fun of Ryan's academic struggle and his athletic ability.

There were no altercations, no physical bruises, no outward signs that would exhibit the pain Ryan was experiencing. The weapons were words. The wounds, though severe, completely invisible.

Halligan said that he and his wife advised Ryan to pay no attention to the boy. "Don't respond to him and he will go away," is the guidance he gave his son.

After that, everything seemed to be okay with Ryan, Halligan recalled. Until December of 2002 when he came home from work to find Ryan with his head down on the kitchen table.

It was then that Ryan told his parents that he hated his school. He told them that he never wanted to go back and begged them to homeschool him.

Although Halligan had thought that everything was all right with his son, he learned that night that it wasn't. Halligan learned that the boy who had been bullying Ryan in the fifth grade was back on Ryan's case in the seventh grade.

"Ryan begged me not to talk to the school," Halligan said. "He said it would only make the situation worse and told me that when another boy's mom had complained, the school did nothing and the situation got worse for that boy."

This is where Halligan interjected that when problems like this arise, often schools will have the two parties sit down to air their differences. Halligan contends that is an appropriate method for conflict resolution, but not for harassment. According to Halligan, there's a big distinction to be made between conflict resolution and harassment.

Conflict resolution can only occur when both parties are in disagreement over a common point. Harrassment suggests an imbalance of power.

The help Ryan asked of his dad was to teach him to fight, saying, "I want to be able to defend myself if he starts something."

Halligan calls this part of Ryan's life the "Karate Kid" phase. This is where together they worked on a program where Ryan learned to physically defend himself. Those skills came into play when Ryan and this boy had a physical altercation one day after school.

According to Halligan, "My son got the courage to fight this kid after school and things seemed to cool down after that."

A string of uneventful months passed until Halligan asked how the situation between the boy and his son was. "Ryan told me that they were good friends now," Halligan recalled. Which seemed completely plausible. After all, he thought, they're 13. Kids turn from friends to foes in the toss of a coin.

During the "friend phase," Halligan said that Ryan confided in this boy about a doctor appointment that he had. According to Halligan, that's when the boy took that story and spun it to the other kids in a way that suggested that Ryan was gay.

"The boy continued to suggest this on-line as well," Halligan said.

In an effort to dispel this viral rumor, that summer Ryan decided to turn his attention to the popular girl in the class "so kids would know that he wasn't gay."

According to Halligan, the girl, who had been Ryan's friend in the lower grades, falsely led Ryan to believe that she was interested in him and, in the process, got him to confide to her in on-line chats. Meanwhile, she was cutting and pasting his personal comments and circulating them on-line.

Shortly after school had started she told Ryan, in front of other people, that he was a loser and she was not interested in him.

According to witnesses, Ryan told her, "It's girls like you that make me want to kill myself."

That day, Ryan took his life.

It was by conversing with Ryan's friends through the computer that Halligan discovered that the instant messaging chat service Ryan was using saved all of his chats, allowing Halligan to get a full picture of what was going on with is son. That's how he discovered the rumor of Ryan's being gay and the popular girl leading him on.

Halligan was able to see just about every single on-line conversation that Ryan had.

"It was heartbreaking," Halligan said.

Halligan also learned that during these difficult years Ryan re-connected with a friend who had moved away in the third grade. Halligan holds that it was this boy's negative influence that ultimately pushed Ryan to take his own life. In one chat this boy wrote to Ryan, "Suicide makes the popular kids feel bad."

In another chat, when Ryan tells the boy he is considering suicide, the boy answers, "It's about f\*\*\*\*\*g time."

In the wake of Ryan's death, Halligan has managed to get Vermont to pass a suicide prevention law that mandates health class must include the warning signs of depression and what resources are available.

Halligan has also successfully lobbied for laws to be passed in Vermont to improve how schools address bullying and suicide prevention.

Halligan also believes that cyberbullying, although a contributing factor, was not the sole cause of Ryan's death. Depression played a huge role. In addition to raising awareness to the effects of cyberbullying, Halligan has now devoted his life to helping young people avoid what Ryan went through. Halligan has turned his intense pain into something productive and travels the country talking to parents and children about [what Ryan went through](http://www.ryanpatrickhalligan.org/index.htm).

*This presentation, organized by Dorene Zacher, was part of New Milford's HIB program.*